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ABSTRACT

Communication strategies are defined and a brief inventory of strategies for learning and oral interaction in a foreign language instruction setting is provided. Learning strategies are viewed as methods for exploiting available information to increase the efficiency of second language learning. The integration of learning strategies into the different elements of a language learning system is examined. Listening strategies may involve formulation of questions and hypotheses, hypothesis testing, inferencing, organizing information, extracting the main information required, active checking, and directly requesting specific information. Speaking strategies may involve use of the monitor, formal reduction, and functional reduction. If teachers and students are to become more aware of these speaking and listening strategies, the strategies will have to become incorporated into both the class objectives and the teaching activities. In a course where the development of communicative strategies is a major objective, it is necessary to evaluate these objectives. Specifically, linguistic, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence should be assessed. It is concluded that while teaching communication strategies will benefit the student, learning strategies need to include a proper respect for the precise understanding of linguistic signals and systems. (RW)

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Strategies for Oral Interaction and Learning

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1. Introduction

Do people just walk away when she tries to practice her French on them? Does she burst into tears and give up trying when she fails to understand the flood of speech her careful request for directions has provoked? Does she simply give way to despair when she sees that there are 50,000 words in her dictionary and 300 pages in her grammar book (and that's not all, and what about all those idioms?)? Or does she have strategies... Ways of keeping people talking (a deceitful pretence that she understands, perhaps?); ways of probing for the exact information she needs and asking for confirmation of what she thinks she has understood; ways of choosing what she wants to learn, ways of learning it, ways of practicing it?.....strategies. And if she hasn't, why not? Did no one think of teaching her strategies - or rather, helping her to develop them?

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The fact is that until the last few years most teachers have not really been aware of strategies - neither strategies of learning nor strategies of communication. Students have sometimes succeeded in developing strategies for themselves, and have become "Good Language Learners" (Rubin 1975). But more recently the language teaching profession has become more aware of the existence of strategies. They seem first to have gained acceptance as a central objective in the teaching of reading. It was realized that the ability to get from a text the meaning - ideas, information, and so on - that one wanted was not solely related to the student's knowledge of the language: some who knew less language were better at it than others who knew a great deal more. (That this insight has tended to

create an assumption that only strategies are important in reading courses and that one can read effectively without knowing much of the language is, in this writer's view, unfortunate.) Strategies for listening comprehension perhaps came next. And strategies for learning and oral interaction have been limping quite some way behind. The present article is an attempt to help rectify this situation.

2. Outline and Intention

We need to consider three main areas. Firstly, to try to answer the fundamental question of "What are strategies?" (i.e. how can we define them?); secondly, to attempt to arrive at a classification, a brief inventory, of strategies for learning and oral interaction; and thirdly, to suggest how they may be integrated into the different elements of a language learning system - course and materials development, classroom and other learning, and evaluation.

I would emphasize here (lest others might) that the aim of this article is not to present my own original research on strategies, but rather to bring together and make accessible to teachers and others who may be interested the work of a number of different groups and individuals who have been working in this area. The present article originated in our own attempt to collect information and ideas for our work at the CELE/UNAM on a new set of objectives for the English Department. We felt strategies were important and needed to be included, but we had no list to refer to. So what follows is mainly the result of that work.

3. The Importance of Strategies

Before discussing the problems of defining strategies, it is relevant to note that they have been seen as one of the three main elements of "communicative competence": "grammatical" (meaning "linguistic") competence, "sociolinguistic" competence (including "discourse"), and "strategic" competence (in Canale and Swain's definition, strategies for overcoming our grammatical and sociolinguistic problems in communication) (Canale and Swain 1980).

Communicative strategies are thus a fundamental part of "what we need to learn when we learn a language." There is also an increasing tendency to see the development of strategies of learning as almost the most important objective of a course: the student who is aware of the strategies he uses and of the need to develop further strategies to improve his learning should be able to make far more rapid progress and to learn far more efficiently than the student who is not. The belief underlying this article is that we can indeed help students to develop their strategies of communication and learning.

4. Defining Strategies: Problems and Proposals

In attempting to arrive at a satisfactory definition of strategies, we need to consider a number of problems: Are strategies conscious? What's the difference between strategies and objectives? To what extent are strategies related to problems?

4.1 Are strategies conscious? The first question is perhaps the most difficult, and this difficulty reflects the fact that different researchers have come to the problem with different perspectives and have used the term "strategies" in different ways. There has, for example, been a whole "psychological" current of research based on how our minds process the language to which they are exposed, and much of this research focuses on processes which are probably not normally conscious, which we cannot even control for much of the time, and which are to some extent inevitable processes in our progress through a series of "interlanguages" towards something resembling the foreign language itself: I refer to the processes of "simplification" (see eg Richards 1975) and "overgeneralization" (see eg Taylor 1975). The first is our presumably innate tendency to try and make the simplest possible rule to explain any experience to which we are exposed; that is, to make sense of it in the simplest possible way. Of course, when we come across new data which does not fit our explanation (hypothesis), we have to modify it. This tendency towards simplification is not really a conscious strategy, but appears to be rather a basic characteristic of the way in which our minds work (- though of course in actual communication we may consciously simplify what we want to say or how we say it, in order to manage with the limited linguistic resources we have - see 6.2.3 and 6.2.4 below).

The related tendency towards "overgeneralization," that is, to apply what we learn - rules, words, and so on - to whatever situation we may think it can be used for, is also hardly a conscious strategy: we cannot know the limitations of what we learn until we have experienced them too. A child will assume that he can walk on anything until he finds out the limitations of, say, ice, and modifies his ideas.

A third phenomenon of this kind is "avoidance" (see eg Kleinmann 1977), the tendency to avoid using bits of language we are not sure about. This one is somewhat trickier, as it may frequently be conscious (see 6.2.3 and 6.2.4 below), in which case it is certainly a strategy by our definition (see 4.4 below).

In general, apart from "avoidance" in the latter sense, we would prefer not to include this type of mental process in our definition of strategies.

4.2 A working definition of learning strategies: Another approach to strategies of learning is to restrict them entirely to the conscious ones. Bialystok (1978) defines them as "optional methods for exploiting available information to increase the proficiency of second language learning." She views them as "conscious enterprises," as does McLaughlin (1978), who uses the terms "discovery procedures" and "heuristics" for potentially unconscious ones. Since, however, in the present climate of unawareness of strategies among many learners and teachers, many are not aware of the "methods" they are using to learn, I would prefer to modify Bialystok's definition for the present purposes, as follows:

> Optional potentially conscious methods for exploiting available information to increase the efficiency of second language learning (my modifications underlined).

Without wishing to become involved in the technicalities of a discussion on degrees of "conscious," "subconscious" and "unconscious," I feel that this definition recognizes the fact that different people using virtually the same strategy may be conscious of it in varying degrees - it may be instinctive or deliberate.

As will be seen in our proposed definition of "communicative

strategies," we also prefer to regard these as "potentially conscious" (see 4.4 below).

4.3 Strategies and objectives: The second problem we mentioned was that of distinguishing between strategies and objectives. What are normally known as "reading strategies," such as "skimming," "scanning," "reading for gist," and so on, are also the objectives of reading activities. Perhaps the simplest way of looking at it is to recognize that the application of the strategy is the decision to specify one's immediate reading objective in that particular way, and to apply a certain set of techniques to achieving it.

4.4 Communicative strategies and problems: a definition of communicative strategies: The third difficulty is the relationship between communicative strategies and problems. For strategies of language production we may note the following definition: "Communication strategies are potentially conscious programs which an individual adopts in order to resolve what he sees as a problem in the attainment of a particular communicative objective" (Faerch and Kasper 1980, author's translation). However, while this does fit certain kinds of receptive strategy ("inferencing" or guessing from context, etc), it hardly fits such reading strategies as those mentioned above ("skimming," "scanning," etc), in that we can hardly say that there is a problem in quite the same specific sense. Perhaps, then, a more appropriate definition for both receptive and productive communicative strategies is the following modified version:

> Optional potentially conscious programs adopted by an individual in order to attain a particular communicative objective or to overcome a problem in its attainment.

(Note: Canale and Swain (1980) also relate strategies solely to problems, when they refer to "...verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient practice".)

4.5 Group and individual strategies: A final observation before we go on to consider a list of strategies is that strategies vary between

groups and also between individuals in a given group. There are obvious variations between members of different cultures, due to education, environment, and perhaps other factors. For example, certain groups (eg many Moslems and members of certain oriental cultures) have a highly developed capacity - and tolerance! - for rote memorization; other groups may have a preference for conscious analysis of the material to which they are exposed; some prefer to learn through listening, others through reading, and so on. Similar differences may be noted between individual learners even within a relatively homogeneous group, due no doubt to a combination of personality and environmental factors: thus a strategy which is helpful for one may not necessarily be helpful for another. (It is also worth noting that "...the need for certain strategies may change as a function of age and second language proficiency.") (Canale and Swain 1980:31).

5. Strategies of Learning

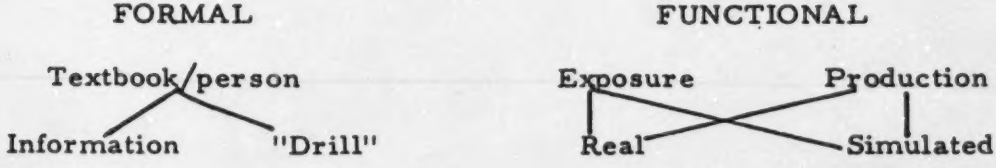
I have already mentioned the "psychological" current of research in this area (see 4.1 above), which I feel hardly falls within my definition of "strategies." The following brief classification is based mainly on work on the "Good Language Learner" (see eg. Rubin 1975). This research, mainly carried out under the direction of H. H. Stern at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, was directed at identifying a number of obviously successful language learners and finding out what factors their success appeared to be based on. The hypothesis was that others might well be able to benefit from using some of their methods. (Note: The British Council also carried out a similar project; see British Council 1978.) The findings might be divided into both "attitudes" and "strategies," but we shall here consider the adoption of an attitude to be a form of strategy (potentially conscious). I have divided these strategies into five categories: awareness; formulation and review of objectives; organizing exposure and practice; observation; processing (using the monitor, getting meaning, getting structure and system); and finally, attitudes.

5.1 Awareness, formulation and review of objectives: The "good language learner" needs to start with an awareness that learning is far more effective and economical if the learner can formulate

clearly what his objectives are. They may involve the type of language use he is aiming at (communicative events, text-types, topic areas, role relationships, etc), strategies themselves, skills and so on. The more clearly he can formulate his objectives, the more likely he is to achieve them efficiently with the minimum of effort wasted on irrelevant activities and learning. Moreover, he is more likely to keep his learning relevant and gain an idea of his progress if he has ways of reviewing these objectives from time to time, and indeed changing or modifying the objectives themselves if they appear unrealistic, irrelevant, or imprecise.

5.2 Organization of exposure and practice: Even where a learner is taking a course of classroom instruction, the more aware he is of the need to organize his exposure and practice in and out of the classroom, the more he is likely to benefit. Bialystok (1978) has divided practice into "formal" (practice of linguistic points) and "functional" (communicative practice, including reading and listening). Formal practice may take the form of work with a teacher (or informant), a textbook, or both, and of "drill" or the seeking of information. Functional practice may involve exposure or production, or a combination of the two, and may be either real (eg the reading of authentic documents - books, magazines, etc - or participating in actual interactions for a real purpose); or simulated (reading or listening to simplified materials, or participating in role play or simulations). The following table sets out these possibilities:

TABLE 1



The achievement of practice may of course involve all kinds of strategies for keeping people talking to one even if one does not actually understand very much. We may note verbal strategies to keep people talking ("Oh yes, Aha, Mhm, Really" - with various intonations, to suggest understanding and interest whether one has understood or not). Another important aspect of practice is the conscious noting of difficulties (and their solutions) which arise in communica-

tion, and also the conscious practice of items we wish to "try out."

5.3 Observation: This involves the use of the Monitor (Krashen 1981, etc) in any of the four main skills. It implies an orientation towards observing the language one hears, reads, speaks or writes. In the case of speaking, the operation of the Monitor is limited by time, but it may certainly still function, both in the sense of trying to foresee problems and avoid them, and in the sense of correcting mistakes where one was too late. In the case of writing, there is usually more time both during composition itself and when reviewing what one has written. In the case of listening and reading, it would imply a general attentiveness to language. In all four skills, it would relate to grammar, lexis (meanings, use, collocations, idioms, lexico-grammatical features such as countability, "verb patterns" and so on), appropriateness to situation, and, in the case of speaking and listening: pronunciation, rhythm, stress and intonation.

5.4 Processing: This may involve the following learning strategies:

1. Awareness of language (using the Monitor - see 5.3 above);

2. Getting meaning: this may involve "inferencing," (ie guessing from comparisons, context, outside knowledge, previous knowledge, etc), or consulting teachers, informants, or works of reference;

3. Getting structure, system and vocabulary: this may involve both the use of inductive reasoning; that is, trying to work out from the examples available how the structure or system works, and consulting teachers, informants or works of reference. It may also involve conscious memorization: here a number of devices may be used - lists, notes, cards, underlining new language items in texts read, regular practice, re-exposure to written, printed or recorded sources, and so on.

5.5 Attitudes: Studies of the "Good Language Learner" speak of his characteristic "drive to communicate," "readiness to prac-

tice" and "lack of inhibition." These may of course be related to personality, but could no doubt at least be modified by a well-motivated learner. A further attitude mentioned is the "readiness to live with uncertainty." This may take various forms: for example, it might involve going on reading or listening without understanding everything, or even understanding relatively little; it might also mean using language forms of which one was not at all sure (grammar, vocabulary, and so on).

6. Strategies of Oral Interaction

I should mention straight away that I am not here attempting to deal with the area of "winning friends and influencing people," nor with culturally determined patterns for specific communicative events. I am simply concerned with ways of getting at the meaning our partner(s) may be trying to convey to us (listening), and of getting across our own meaning, however limited our linguistic resources may be (speaking). The listening strategies include two types (see points 6 and 7 of 6.1 below) which can only be used in oral interaction. The remainder are common to all kinds of listening.

6.1 Listening: The following types of strategies may be involved:

1. Formulation of questions and hypotheses; prediction (at global and detailed levels, language and content);

2. Hypothesis testing: this involves the use of what we do recognize and/or understand in order to test and if necessary to modify our predictions and other hypotheses, and to form new ones. (If the speaker is present, we can clearly use "active checking" for this - see 6. below);

3. Inferencing: the systematic "guessing" of the meaning of words, phrases, grammatical items, or longer passages of the utterance, using hypotheses, prediction, previous knowledge, the verbal and situational context, and such clues as intonation and "attitudinal tone" (ie, the feelings and attitudes suggested by the speaker's intonation, etc);

4. Organization of information and ideas received: this is the

process of "structuring" the incoming ideas and information, and integrating them with previous knowledge and ideas.

5. Extraction of the main information required: this involves deciding on what are the essentials and what are non-essentials in relation to our purpose in listening;

6. Active checking (when the speaker or another informant is available): this may involve framing the hypothesis as a question, eg "Do you/Does this mean...?"; "So what you're saying is..."; or it might take the form of a request for clarification: "What does X mean?"; "What do you mean by X?", and so on.

7. Direct request for specific information (when speaker available).

6.2 Speaking (for practice strategies in speaking, see 5.2 above): The following are some of the strategies we use in speaking:

1. Use of Monitor: this will vary according to the person and the purpose of speaking. Some people hardly appear to use the Monitor at all when speaking, which, if they have language problems, may tend to lead to fossilization of many of their errors (ie, the errors become very difficult to eradicate); others overuse the Monitor and risk impairing the communication. Thus learners should ideally gear their use of the Monitor to "learning" or "communication," according to their predominant objective at the moment;

2. Relative lack of inhibition: willingness to make mistakes and appear foolish if necessary;

3. "Formal reduction": (similar to "avoidance" and "simplification" 4.1 above): this involves the reduction or simplification of the grammar, lexis, or phonology where one is not sure;

4. Functional reduction: this means modifying or reducing one's communicative intention where one is not sure of the

language involved. For example, one might settle for just greeting someone if one is not sure how to express the complaint about their behavior which one would like to make without giving offense;

5. Accomplishment: there are a number of ways of getting one's message across even with inadequate linguistic resources. The following are a few of them:

- linguistic: use or adaptation of the mother tongue, or another familiar language (especially if closer to the language one is using); use of "made-up words or expressions," or circumlocutions;

- appeals for help: these may be explicit (asking for a word, "How do you say...", or "signals of uncertainty" such as, "You know what I mean" (which usually suggests that the speaker fears just the opposite); "I don't know what you call ...", and so on. They may also be implicit, involving false starts, expressions like "I mean," "you see," "you know," or "well,...", "er/um," and so on. An implicit appeal for help could also take the form of a pause or hesitation, sighs, clicks or heavy breathing, a repetition of the previous element, a rising intonation on the element about which one is doubtful, laughter, or other non-verbal means such as a worried frown or a look of appeal, sometimes together with verbal means;

- non-linguistic means of accomplishment such as gesture, mime, imitation of sounds, and so on.

(Note: Points 3. to 5. are taken from Faerch and Kasper 1980)

7. Strategies, Course Development and Teaching

If teachers and students are to become more aware of strategies of communication and learning, these will need to be incorporated into both the objectives and the activities which we include in the syllabus. For them to be relevant, we need to know what strategies the

students already use. We can find this out to some extent during a preliminary needs analysis: Allwright, at the National Convention in 1982, suggested ways of running workshops with the students at the beginning of a course to make them more aware of the strategies they use, and to find out more about them.

In the teaching-learning process itself, strategies may be developed in a number of ways (all of which need to be suggested in the syllabus itself, which also needs to give any explanations teachers may need).

7.1 Evaluation/negotiation sessions: A language course should include periodical sessions where the students discuss with the teacher the aspects which are causing them problems, and also those which are giving them satisfaction. During such a discussion, a great deal of useful information on strategies (mainly of learning) can be exchanged between students and also fed in by the teacher, and this will also greatly contribute to the students' awareness of strategies. Many teachers may feel that such sessions, which should in a normal (5-10 hours per week) course be planned for every two to three weeks (and in a short, intensive course even more frequently), are a waste of time, distracting from the serious business of studying the language itself. However, if the students are at all motivated to learn, time spent focusing on the learning process itself is probably more valuable than anything else they might be doing; if they are not motivated, it might well in some cases help to rectify the situation.

7.2 Special activities: In reading and listening courses, it is already common practice to design certain activities specifically in order to develop a given strategy or strategies. This may also be done for strategies of oral interaction. We have, for example, seen such course activities as: "Use all the means at your disposal in order to express an opinion." Needless to say, such an activity should not normally be interrupted for corrections, at least not by the teacher. Activities could also be designed to develop the student's ability to use the help of the person he is talking or listening to. Yet others may be designed to help develop certain learning strategies. These may include, for example, various kinds of "sensitization activities" designed to make the students more aware

of how the language works, eg dictionary exercises to make students more aware of verb patterns or phrasal verbs should be of inestimable value in training the students to observe these features, and thus to benefit more from their exposure to language.

7.3 Incidental reinforcement: There are many opportunities in a normal language course to make students aware of the strategies they (or their classmates) are using, and also to draw attention to points at which their strategies were inadequate: "Did you notice how Miguel got round the word he didn't know?" - "How else might he have done it?" - "Did you notice the problem Enrique had?" - "How might he have solved it?" - and so on.

Learning strategies could also occasionally be discussed incidentally in this way. The teacher may notice that many students have trouble with a certain aspect (past tenses, verb patterns, prepositions, irregular verbs, etc), or indeed the students themselves may, if encouraged, raise problems of this kind. This can lead naturally to a discussion of what they may do to overcome them.

8. Strategies and the Evaluation of Oral Interaction

In a course where the development of communicative strategies is a major objective, it is logical that they should be evaluated. Since I have not come across any actual research in this area, I can only give tentative suggestions. In keeping with the three elements of communicative competence quoted in section 3 above, we should evaluate "linguistic," "sociolinguistic" and "strategic" competence. We have in fact developed (at CELE/UNAM) a set of tentative "minimum promotion criteria"; that is, explicit criteria for a student to be promoted from one level to the next, which more or less coincide with these three components.

An example follows:

TABLE 2

(In order to be promoted from level 3 to level 4, students would need to satisfy the following minimum requirements:)

COMMUNICATIVE EFFECTIVENESS: Communication effective in relation to communicative objectives set for the level: still largely simple utterances, with occasional longer or more complex ones.

LINGUISTIC: Control of grammar and vocabulary has extended to general grasp of main basic forms and structures, though still with frequent errors, and hesitations for apparently linguistic reasons.*

STRATEGIES: Conscious of strategies, and uses the main ones where necessary to aid communication.

*Hesitations are a matter of fluency, and we have tried to distinguish between hesitations or lack of fluency which appear to be due to linguistic problems, and those which appear, in the context of the teacher's knowledge of the student, to be due to personality factors.

It should be stressed, however, that we have not yet tried out this system. In fact, the criteria for strategies (as distinct from the others) do not in our tentative scheme vary much from one level to the next: the main thing is that the student starts from the beginning to develop strategies. We feel that if they are included in testing criteria, there is a greater likelihood that teachers and students will pay more attention to them.

On the level of "informal" evaluation, one might suggest that the teacher should note the development of strategies (both of learning and of communication) by the students.

9. Suggestions for Research

There is a great deal to be done before we can talk with very much confidence about the place of strategies in language learning.

Firstly, we need to know more about what strategies there are. The above classification is only a very rough-and-ready attempt to produce an initial working list. Secondly, we need to know more about the extent to which strategies can be learnt, and the extent to which different strategies suit different people: how far can different types of students benefit from the strategies of the "Good Language Learner?" Thirdly, we need to know more about means of evaluating strategies, and indeed even about the desirability of doing so. There are many other kinds of research which would be interesting; for instance, to observe classes to find out which strategies, in a given situation, are rewarded, and which are penalized. Readers will no doubt think of many more areas for research.

10. Conclusions

We have looked at a number of strategies of oral interaction and learning, and we have suggested ways in which they may be incorporated into our courses. I hope that readers who do not already do so will be interested in applying the ideas to their own objectives and teaching. But I would repeat my warning against making strategies the sole objective of teaching: strategies of communication will take our students a long way, but their learning strategies need to include a proper respect for the precise understanding of linguistic signals and systems (grammatical, lexical, phonological and graphological, according to their objectives). If the end-product of our course is a group of students who can communicate up to a point by using strategies, but who are not interested in the precise meaning of the language, we have done them a disservice. The point of strategies is two-fold: firstly, to communicate better with limited resources at a given point in time (and of course to do the kinds of things in the second language which they do in the mother tongue when using the various skills), and secondly, to develop ways of further refining their knowledge of the language. And we must make sure the students develop both kinds.*

* Author's note: A recent book (Gumperz 1982) on the subject of strategies in discourse has just come to my notice, too late to be considered in this article. It should however be of considerable interest to readers.

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